Nature and Landscape in the Chinese Tradition

Longxi Zhang

Nature has left its mark on the very writing system in China if we accept the myth of Cangjie creating Chinese written characters by observing the traces left by birds and beasts on the ground, which obviously follows an earlier myth of the creation of hexagrams by Fuxi as recorded in the appended phrases in the *Book of Changes*: "In ancient times when Pao Xi ruled all under heaven, he looked upward to observe the forms in the sky and looked downward to observe the models on the earth, and he also observed the pattern of traces left by birds and animals on the ground and the configurations of the earth. By taking hint near at hand from his body and farther away from external things, he then created the hexagrams to make the virtue of gods comprehensible and the nature of all things known in signs."[1] This passage was quoted by Xu Shen (58–147 C. E.) of the Eastern Han dynasty when he compiled *Shouwen jiezi* or *Explanation of Written Scripts*, the first dictionary of Chinese characters, and gave a mythological explanation to the origin of Chinese writing by continuing the myth and saying: "Having seen the traces left by the claws and hoofs of birds and beasts and understood how their patterns could differentiate them from one another, Cangjie, the Yellow Emperor's historian, first created the written characters."[2] In such a description, Cangjie created Chinese scripts by taking hint from patterns

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[1] *Zhouyi zhengyi* 周易正義[*The Correct Meaning of the Book of Changes*], in Ruan Yuan 阮元 (1764–1849) (ed.), *Shisan jing zhushu* 十三經注疏[*The Thirteen Classics with Annotations*], 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1980), 1: 86.

[2] Xu Shen 許慎, with annotations by Duan Yucai 段玉裁 (1735–1815), *Shouwen jiezi zhu* 說文解字注 [*Annotations to the Explanation of Written Scripts*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1988), p. 753.

L. Zhang (✉)
Comparative Literature and Translation, City University of Hong Kong,
Kowloon, Hong Kong
e-mail: ctlxzh@cityu.edu.hk

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and shapes suggested by nature itself and, like the creation of hexagrams, he made abstract signs out of the concrete shapes and forms in the natural world. Chinese writing thus seems to have a particularly close relationship with nature; so much so that in the first chapter of the famous treatise *Literary Mind or the Carving of Dragons* written at the end of the fifth century (496–497), the literary critic Liu Xie (465?–522) was able to declare that *wen*—pattern, design, writing, and literature—"was born together with heaven and earth," that is, having a cosmic origin. Liu Xie continues to say:

> The dark blue of heaven and the yellow of earth began the blending of all colors; their square and spheric forms started the differentiation of all shapes. Like a pair of holed disks of jade, the sun and the moon exhibit images attached to the sky; shining with splendor, mountains and rivers mark the contours of the ground. This is indeed the writing (*wen*) of *tao*. …Man is the flower of the five elements and is indeed the mind of heaven and earth. When there is mind, speech is established, and when there is speech, writing takes a clear form. That is the way that nature is.[3]

Now a word of clarification is in order. What I translate as "nature" here is *ziran* (自然) in Liu Xie's original, a term that can be found in the *Laozi* and some other ancient Chinese texts. From the several texts quoted above, we may see that the word *ziran* is closely related to, if not exactly synonymous with, the more concrete notions of heaven and earth (*tian di* 天地), mountains and rivers (*shan chuan* 山川), and shapes (*xing* 形) and traces (*ji* 跡) in the phenomenal world as different from the world of human affairs. Perhaps the best way to understand *ziran* is to see it as differentiated from, or opposite to, whatever is man-made (*ren wei* 人為), that is, artificial and unnatural. Whatever is *ziran* is that which exists and evolves of its own course, not according to an externally imposed set of protocols. In other words, *ziran* is doing what comes naturally, out of one's own nature. Of course, in languages as different as Chinese and English, the translatability of terms is always debatable, but let us not forget that the word "nature" in modern European languages, too, as derived from the Latin *natura*, has a complicated history and diverse meanings of its own, and in many ways it is a translation of the Greek *physis*, which has its own convoluted semantic history. "Even the most cursory survey of other cultural traditions greatly complicates an already labyrinthine situation," as Lorraine Daston and Fernando Vidal argue, "which stands as a warning against unthinking attempts to universalize often idiosyncratic modern Western intellectual traditions to history and the world at large. Despite their important continuities with European scientific, philosophical, and religious traditions, archaic Greek and classical Arabic sources offer no single word that corresponds to 'nature' as the sum total of the entire universe, although they do possess cognates to 'nature' as the essence of an individual or class."[4] That is to say, even within the European tradition from ancient Greek to modern European languages, "nature" is not a simple concept with a singularly clear meaning. Given the complexity of this term, then, translation is

[3] Liu Xie 劉勰, with annotations by Fan Wenlan 范文瀾 (1891–1969), *Wenxin diaolong zhu* 文心雕龍注 [*Literary Mind or the Carving of Dragons with Annotations*], 2 vols. (Beijing: Renmin wenxue, 1958), 1: 1.

[4] Lorraine Daston and Fernando Vidal, "Introduction: Doing What Comes Naturally," in L. Daston and F. Vidal (eds.), *The Moral Authority of Nature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 4.

never the finding of an exact match of the word "nature" in Chinese but the finding or construction of an equivalent word and concept. "The categories of the natural and the nonnatural must be constantly construed and filled with content," as Daston and Vidal remark: "is the opposite of nature art? nurture? culture? history? the supernatural? the unnatural? The work of construal and instantiation turns out to be widely and interestingly distributed," as different types of scholars and experts come to define nature in rather different ways.[5] Despite all the differences and difficulties, translation is always possible as we construe and build up meanings in forms of equivalency between languages. The Chinese term *ziran* may not match "nature" in English or the other European languages in each and every occasion, but in most cases—we may safely conclude—the two terms carry equivalent semantic values and have equivalent functions and are thus eminently translatable.

Liu Xie's emphasis on the cosmic origin of *wen* has sometimes been misappropriated to make the argument that Chinese writing and literature are not human creations but form part of nature or the manifestation of nature.[6] As I have argued elsewhere, however, by giving writing a cosmic origin, Liu Xie "not only bestows on writing the borrowed authority of nature and expands the concept of writing to a grandiose proportion, but he also subsumes everything natural under the regulation and order of human invention, the *constructed* patterns and designs exemplified by the writings of the ancient sages."[7] If Liu Xie perpetuates a myth that relates nature with Chinese signs like hexagrams and written characters, there are other Chinese myths that highlight the difference between writing as human invention and nature as things in their original, pristine condition. Most interesting and relevant to our purposes here is a myth found in the Han dynasty text, *Huainanzi*, which tells the strange story that "in ancient times when Cangjie created written characters, millet grains rained down from heaven and ghosts wailed at night." The third-century commentator Gao You (fl. 205–212) interprets this as a supernatural sign to mark the separation of man from nature as a consequence of the invention of writing, which also marks the loss of innocence and the beginning of "deception and falsehood" in the human world. With the efficacy of writing, "people would abandon the work of farming and strive for the tiniest of gains. Heaven foreknew that they were to starve, so it let millet grains rain down; and all ghosts were afraid to be condemned by written verdict, so they wailed at night."[8] This myth and its interpretation set up an opposition between farming and writing, the innocence of the country and

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[5] Ibid., p. 7.

[6] For the use of the first chapter of Liu Xie's *Literary Mind* for a "naturalist" interpretation of the Chinese language and literature, see François Jullien, *La valeur allusive: Des catégories originales de l'interprétation poétique dans la tradition chinoise* (*Contribution à une réflexion sur l'altérité interculturelle*) (Paris: École française d'Extrême-Orient, 1985); and Stephen Owen, *Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics: Omen of the World* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

[7] Zhang Longxi, *Allegoresis: Reading Canonical Literature East and West* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005), p. 34.

[8] Liu An 劉安 (178?–122 B. C. E.), *Huainanzi* 淮南子 [*The Master of Huainan*], ed. and annotated by Gao You 高誘, in *Zhuzi jicheng* 諸子集成 [*Collection of Master Writings*], 8 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1954), 7: 116–17.

the dubious sophistication of the city, and thereby creating a general theme of the human-nature relationship with the possibility of numerous variations.

When Gao You explained that the creation of written characters marked the beginning of "deception and falsehood," the word "falsehood" is *wei* (偽) in the Chinese original, a script composed of a human radical (*ren* 人) and action (*wei* 為), so literally it means "human action," hence "man-made," "artificial," or "false" as opposed to what is "true" and "natural." There is an interesting tension between the literal sense of the word *wei* as "human action" and its usual, pejorative meaning of "false," for human action changes what is the original, natural condition, and at the same time changes human beings themselves. Without changing out of the natural condition, human beings would be no different from birds and animals in the wilderness that form part of nature; so in that sense, the creation of language and writing and the separation of man from nature are the very conditions of being human. Among ancient Chinese thinkers, Xunzi (313–238 B. C. E.) gave the word *wei* a most original interpretation with definitely positive connotations. Xunzi argues that human nature (*xing* 性) is inherently bad as we are all born self-centered creatures trying to satisfy our own needs, and it takes human action as a conscious effort to do what is morally good against our natural tendency to do whatever it takes to benefit ourselves. "That which is so since one's birth is called human nature… The likes and dislikes, joy and anger, sorrow and happiness out of one's nature are called emotions," says Xunzi. Out of human emotions come different kinds of desires and wishes, which he calls intentions (*lü* 慮). "When the mind has an intention and the bodily faculties are motivated to execute it, it is called action."[9] Xunzi clearly set up an opposition between what is naturally inborn and what human beings can achieve by conscious effort and action. "The nature of man is evil," he declares unambiguously, "what does good is human action."[10] He argues that "nature is the original, uncarved material, which is embellished and adorned by action. If there were no [uncarved] nature, there would be nothing for action to act upon, and if there were no action, nature would not be able to beautify itself. It is when nature and action come together that the sage emerges to proclaim the unity of things, and thereby the accomplishment of all under heaven is achieved."[11] The word "action" in Xunzi's original is *wei* (偽), the same word that means "falsehood" in Gao You's commentary, but Xunzi understands this word literally as human action, and it is through *wei* as human action—that is, through what is artful and artificial—that human beings can rise above their natural condition and turn what is simple and crude into something civil, beautiful, and accomplished. Xunzi has a very clear view of the opposition between man and nature, between human civilization and natural crudity.

The ambiguity of the word *wei* has particular relevance to art—art both as imaginative and creative human action and as artificial, fictional representation, what

[9] Wang Xianqian 王先謙 (1842–1918), *Xunzi jijie* 荀子集解 [*Xunzi with Collected Annotations*], in *Zhuzi jicheng* [*Collection of Master Writings*], 2: 274.

[10] Ibid., 2: 289.

[11] Ibid., 2: 243.

Oscar Wilde deliberately calls: "Lying, the telling of beautiful untrue things."[12] That "untrue" element or artistic fictionality is of course the problem Plato has with art for "fashioning phantoms far removed from reality."[13] In ancient China, Laozi also makes a clear distinction between the true and the beautiful when he says that "true words are not beautiful, and beautiful words are not true."[14] This is consistent with the Taoist position that stands against human intervention in favor of returning to the uncarved and pristine natural condition, but Xunzi the Confucian has totally different views and advocates the role of *wei* as transformative human action. Only by changing and transcending nature, Xunzi argues, can human beings build up civil institutions and achieve moral perfection. In such a view, then, art can be said to represent human action at its farthest remove from nature, because it is self-consciously artificial, and therefore the mark of social and cultural development, the measure of the degree of human civilization.

The very consciousness of nature is possible only when human beings are separated from nature to such a degree that they can observe and contemplate it as an object from a critical distance. "*Taste* is the ability to judge an object, or a way of presenting it, by means of a liking or disliking *devoid of all interest*," as Kant famously puts it. "The object of such a liking is called *beautiful*."[15] Though human evolution can be said to be a process of increasing separation from nature, the aesthetic appreciation of nature can only arise at a time when civilization has reached a mature stage and people can contemplate the beauty of nature "devoid of all interest." Before such a time, nature was hardly to be appreciated and admired from an aesthetic perspective and at a sufficient distance. This can be seen in another passage from the *Huainanzi*, which shows how threatening and dangerous nature was perceived to be by the Chinese in antiquity: "In ancient times, the four pillars that held heaven were broken and the nine continents were severed apart; heaven did not cover the entire world, nor did the earth sustain all things. Everything burst into flames without end, and waves surged everywhere with nothing to stop them; ferocious beasts devoured innocent people, and huge birds of prey snatched the elderly and the weak."[16] Nature was seen as fire and flood, as ferocious beasts and predators. In European imagination, a terrifying image of nature also lasted for a long period of time. "The fear of the wilderness was one of the strongest elements in European attitudes to wilderness up to the nineteenth century, with the eighteenth century marking a period of transition," says John Short.[17] "The traditional agrarian view

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[12] Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying," *Intentions* (New York: Brentano's, 1950), p. 55.

[13] Plato, *Republic* X, 605b, *The Collected Dialogues of Plato, including the Letters*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963), p. 830.

[14] Laozi with annotations by Wang Bi 王弼 (226–249), *Laozi zhu* 老子注 [*Laozi with Annotations*], chapt. 81, in *Zhuzi jicheng* [*Collection of Master Writings*], 3:47.

[15] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), §5, p. 53.

[16] Liu An, *Huainanzi* [*The Master of Huainan*], in *Zhuzi jicheng* [*Collection of Master Writings*], 7: 95.

[17] John Rennie Short, *Imagined Country: Environment, Culture and Society* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 6.

saw forests as the home of evil spirits," he continues. "European folklore is populated with demons and dangers who dwell in the forest: that was where little Red Riding Hood met the wolf."[18] This may be slightly overstated, but by and large it is true that there was an obvious transition in the European attitude toward nature from fear to appreciation as knowledge of nature developed and the society as a whole evolved from the medieval to the modern forms.

It is a simple fact in both Chinese and Western art histories that landscape painting as an independent genre emerged much later than figure painting. In his important treatise *On Famous Paintings from Various Dynasties*, the ninth-century scholar Zhang Yanyuan discussed art works from the Wei-Jin period to his own time, the late Tang, and commented on many of his contemporary artists. Wu Daozi (680–740), he says, "often painted stunning stones and rushing mountain torrents in his frescos in Buddhist temples, stones you could almost touch and water you could almost scoop up with a ladle," which suggests that those stones and torrents form part of the background for Buddhist figures. But other Tang artists, particularly Li Sixun (651–716) and his son Li Zhaodao, two generals of the early Tang from the same Li family clan as the emperor, created landscape painting in colors, known as "blue and green landscape." Thus, Zhang Yanyuan remarks that "the transformation of landscape started with Wu (Daozi) and was accomplished by the two Li's."[19] According to Zhang Yanyuan, then, the maturity of Chinese landscape can be dated to the Tang dynasty, but a modern artist and art critic, Fu Baoshi (1904–1965), rejected this view in an effort to push back the beginning of Chinese landscape to a much earlier date. Fu argues that Chinese landscape started not in the Tang but in the Wei-Jin period and even earlier. Based on his reading of a piece attributed to the Jin painter Gu Kaizhi (344?–405), Fu claims that "in the Jin dynasty—particularly the Eastern Jin, Chinese landscape painting had already reached a remarkable level."[20] Many Chinese art historians have since adopted Fu's view and generally hold that "landscape painting started to bud out in the Jin."[21] To date the "budding out" of Chinese landscape in the Jin (265–420) is fine. In fact, "mountain and river poetry" (*shan shui shi* 山水詩) or nature poetry did start to develop in the Wei-Jin period, as Liu Xie remarks in the *Literary Mind* that "when Laozi and Zhuangzi bade farewell, then landscape started to arise."[22] This refers to the rise of landscape

[18] Ibid., pp. 7–8.

[19] Zhang Yanyuan 張彥遠, *Lun hua* 論畫 [*On Paintings*], in Shen Zicheng 沈子丞 (ed.), *Lidai lun hua mingzhu huibian* 歷代論畫名著彙編 [*Collection of Famous Writings on Painting from Various Dynasties*] (Beijing: Wenwu, 1982), p. 37.

[20] Fu Baoshi 傅抱石, *Zhongguo gudai shanshui hua shi yanjiu* 中國古代山水畫史研究 [*Studies in the History of Classical Chinese Landscape Painting*] (Taipei: Xuehai, 1982), p, 56.

[21] Chen Chuanxi 陳傳席, *Zhongguo shanshui hua shi* 中國山水畫史 [*History of Chinese Landscape Painting*] (Nanjing: Jiangsu meishu, 1988), p. 1.

[22] Liu Xie, with annotations by Fan Wenlan, *Wenxin diaolong zhu* [*Literary Mind or the Carving of Dragons with Annotations*], 1:67.

poetry, of which Cao Cao's 曹操 (155–220) "Looking at the blue sea" (*guan canghai* 觀滄海) is perhaps the earliest fruition. During the Wei-Jin period, Taoism became the predominant influence among scholars and with it emerged a new kind of naturalism, the appreciation of nature with a philosophical or even spiritual significance. Eminent Chinese scholars and historians like Chen Yinke (1890–1969) and Tang Yongtong (1893–1964) have all discussed the influence of Taoist philosophy on the Wei-Jin intellectual scene and the rise of naturalism. In commenting on personal qualities, natural images were often used during that period, and soon landscape arose to depict nature as it was perceived to be.[23] That is indeed how nature poetry started during the Wei-Jin period.

Landscape painting as an independent genre, however, is a somewhat different matter. The great Jin painter Gu Kaizhi is famous for his figure painting, not landscape, and a treatise on painting attributed to him is concerned mainly with painting human figures. Wu Daozi of the Tang dynasty is also known for his frescos with Buddhist deities and Taoist immortals painted on the walls of temples. As Zhang Yanyuan describes him, the figures he painted "have curly beard and flowing long hair; one can see where the hair grows out of the flesh and get an impression of power and strength."[24] Zou Yigui (1686–1772), a painter of the Qing dynasty, also remarks that "Since the Han and Jin, most painters had engaged in painting figures and palaces, and Wu Daozi of the Tang also excelled in figure painting."[25] From these comments we may conclude that Zhang Yanyuan is factually more defensible than his modern critics when he observes that "the transformation of landscape started with Wu and accomplished by the two Li's." If we are determined to seek predecessors of landscape in paintings before the Tang, we can surely find some traces. Gu Kaizhi's *Goddess of the Luo River*, for example, though mainly a figure painting, does have some landscape as background. *Snowy Mountain and Red Trees* by Zhang Sengyao of the Southern Dynasties is already a true landscape, and the *Stroll in the Spring* by Zhan Ziqian (550?–604?) of the Sui Dynasty, the earliest existent landscape painting in China, had a deep influence on early Tang painters. From what we can learn in art history, however, it becomes quite clear that it is indeed after the invention of the "blue and green landscape" by Li Sixun and Li Zhaodao in the Tang that landscape became an independent genre and quickly occupied the position of the main form of traditional Chinese painting. Besides Li's style of "blue and green landscape" in color, the well-known poet Wang Wei (701–761) created a different style of landscape with only ink and water, which gradually became a major form of literati painting with numerous great practitioners throughout the centuries.

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[23] See Tang Yongtong 湯用彤, "Wei-Jin Literature and Thought," in *Tang Yongtong quanji* 湯用彤全集 [*Tang Yongtong's Complete Works*], 7 vols. (Shijiazhuang: Hebei renmin, 2000), 4:292 ff.

[24] Zhang Yanyuan, *Lun hua* [*On Paintings*], in Shen Zicheng (ed.), *Lidai lun hua mingzhu huibian* [*Collection of Famous Writings on Painting from Various Dynasties*], p. 39.

[25] Zou Yigui 鄒一桂, *Xiaoshan huapu* 小山畫譜 [*Xiaoshan's Painting Models*], ibid., p. 453.

Western landscape painting became an independent genre hundreds of years later than its Chinese counterpart. In ancient Greek and Roman art, there were idyllic scenes depicted with mythological figures, but for much of European art history, religious and mythological themes predominated in painting and the other forms of art, and it is not until the end of the fifteenth century, roughly equivalent to the mid-Ming dynasty in China, that the great German painter Albrecht Dürer painted, during the summer of 1494, his first watercolors—of scenes around Nuremberg—the *Cemetery of St. John*, the *Wire-Drawing Mill*, and some studies of trees, which "are among the first landscape paintings in their own right in German art."[26] These are in fact among the earliest landscape paintings in European art, though some 20 years earlier, in 1473, Leonardo da Vinci already sketched the scenery in Arno Valley, which marks the first attempt at the representation of nature in the fifteenth century. Leon Battista Alberti's *Della Pittura* (1435) is the first important treatise on art during the Renaissance, but it says nothing about landscape, for it is concerned with the formation of a precise perspective on buildings, their classical architectural forms and spatial relationships, which forms a background for the display of various human activities. Natural scenery is irregular and lacks the kind of symmetry and clear geometrical forms, that is, the ideal space Alberti favored; therefore, from this scientifically inspired point of view, nature provides at best a space for the activities of farmers or shepherds, while architectural structures of palaces and temples are much more important as background for the more distinctly urban life.

In the sixteenth century, Europe rediscovered the idyllic tradition in the Greco-Roman classics, which legitimized the representation of nature in art and literature. Horace's *Ars poetica* and its somewhat misunderstood phrase *ut pictura poesis* became tremendously influential and gave rise to the idea of poetry and painting as sister arts. Giorgione (1477–1510) perhaps best represents the spirit of such a merging of arts, and his works such as *Concert champêtre* and the *Sleeping Venus* indeed have the beauty not only of pictorial art but also suggestive of poetic sensibility and the harmonious quality of music, so much so that Water Pater praised his work as "this pictorial poetry."[27] In the idealization of nature, these works are important in the Western tradition of idyllic landscape. The other great Venetian painters—Giovanni Bellini (1430–1516), Titian (1477–1576), and Giulio Campagnola (1482–1515?), to mention just a few—began to depict the beauty of nature even when they focused on the values of man. "The Italians," as Jakob Burckhardt observes, "are the first among modern peoples by whom the outward world was seen and felt as something beautiful."[28] Since the Renaissance, landscape quickly developed into a major form of art in Europe with many great artists not just in Italy but also in France, Germany, the Netherlands, Great Britain, and many other countries.

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[26] Fedja Anzelewsky, *Dürer: His Art and Life*, trans. Heide Grieve (New York: Konecky & Konecky, 1980), p. 37.

[27] Water Pater, "The School of Giorgione," *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (London: Macmillan, 1925), p. 149.

[28] Jakob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans. S. G. C. Middlemore (London: Phaidon, 1965), p. 178.

What is the relationship between man and nature as represented in landscape paintings, whether Chinese or Western? The differences between Chinese and Western paintings are huge and obvious, and in each we may investigate that relationship underlying the very design and execution of the art work. In China, landscape became the mainstream after the Tang, known as "the primary among the 13 subjects for painters."[29] In the layout of a typical Chinese landscape, much of the space is occupied by natural scenery, while human figures, if they appear at all, are usually tiny in comparison with the huge mountains. Li Zhaodao's *Emperor Ming's Visit of Sichuan*, Fan Kuan's (f. 1020) *Travelers along a Mountain Stream*, and Qiu Ying's (1498?–1552) *Thatched Cottage in a Village of Peach Trees* are all exemplary works in this regard. In contrast, most Western landscape paintings have human figures and their dwellings occupying the focal point; Pieter Bruegel's (1525?–1569) *Hunters in the Snow*, John Constable's (1776–1837) *The Hay Wain*, and many other landscape paintings are all good examples. On the basis of such obvious differences, some have argued that Chinese and Western arts and cultures are fundamentally different, that because the Chinese have the idea of "heaven and man merging into one" (*tian ren heyi* 天人合一), man is not separated from nature and Chinese landscape thus represents pure nature with no human figures in the center. On the other hand, so the argument goes, the West has always been human-centered, so man has a predominant presence in landscape paintings, which cannot escape from the centrality of the human self to represent nature in its purity. In his famous *Commentaries on ci Poetry*, Wang Guowei (1877–1927) puts forward the notion of "world" (*jingjie* 境界) in poetic works and argues that there is a distinction between two kinds of "world" in literary and artistic works—a world that has the self in it and a world that has no self. "In the world that has the self," says Wang, "the self observes all things and thereby has all of them tainted with the color of the self. In the world that has no self, things are observed in and of themselves, and it is impossible to know where the self begins and where the thing ends."[30] Again, some have used this distinction to argue that Chinese landscape depicts a "world that has no self," whereas Western landscape produces a "world that has the self," a distinction that has sometimes been taken to be the essential difference between Eastern and Western arts and cultures as pure nature and self-centered human creation.

Such an argument seems to be articulating at best only half truth and the easily visible half at that. Having said what has just been quoted above, Wang Guowei goes on to say: "of the ancient poets who composed *ci* poetry, most created a world that has the self, but they were not incapable of creating worlds with no self." That is to say, most ancient Chinese poets depict a "world that has the self." To be sure, poetry and painting are different, and most Chinese landscape paintings do have

[29] Jing Hao 荊浩 (855?–915), *Shanshui jue* 山水訣 [*Essentials of Landscape*], in Shen Zicheng (ed.), *Lidai lun hua mingzhu huibian* [*Collection of Famous Writings on Painting from Various Dynasties*], p. 53.

[30] Wang Guowei 王國維, *Renjian cihua* 人間詞話 [*Commentaries on ci Poetry*], ed. Xu Tiaofu 徐調孚 (Hong Kong: Zhongshu, 1961), p. 1.

more natural scenery than human figures. But we should pay attention to another passage from Wang Guowei's work, in which he says: "Things in nature are connected with, and restricted by, one another, but such connections and restrictions must be removed when they are represented in works of art and literature. Therefore, an artist, however realistic, is also an idealist. At the same time, an artistic world, however fictional, must take all its stuff from nature and obey the laws of nature in its construction. Therefore, an artist, however idealistic, is also a realist."[31] Here, Wang makes it clear that if "having the self" is a subjective position that projects human ideas onto nature and constructs a fictional world through imagination, then the artist is most likely an idealist who has all things "tainted with the color of the self." On the other hand, if "having no self" is an objective position that eliminates the "self" to let things "be observed in and of themselves," then the artist is most likely a realist whose works do not clearly distinguish the self and external things, so it becomes impossible "to know where the self begins and where the thing ends." In other words, the distinction between the "world that has the self" and the "world that has no self" would be equivalent to that between the "idealist" and the "realist." Wang Guowei's argument, however, is meant precisely to dislodge such a mechanical dichotomy, for he maintains that artistic creation must be the combination of the subjective and the objective and that no absolute demarcation line separates the realistic and the idealistic. Artistic worlds can indeed be said to "have the self" or "have no self," but that is not a difference between Chinese and Western arts, for such different "worlds" can be found in both Chinese and Western art works.

If we go further to examine Chinese and Western landscape paintings, we may even say that Western landscape tends to be more realistic than its Chinese counterpart, that it lays a greater emphasis on precision and verisimilitude in representing the forms of objects, and on truthfulness of color, texture, and substance. Whether it is due to the availability of painting materials and techniques, particularly oil painting, or to the use of perspective and shading as the result of scientific interest and advancement, by and large Western paintings do look more realistic than most Chinese literati paintings. When first coming into contact with Western paintings during the late Ming or early Qing dynasties, quite a few Chinese marveled at their life-likeness. Gu Qiyuan, a late Ming scholar, gives a vivid description of the *Madonna and Child*, which the Jesuit father Matteo Ricci had brought to China from Rome. "The portrait is painted in color on a copper plate and looks very real," Gu Qiyuan reports. "The body and the arms look like protruding from the plate, and the face with light and shade looks no different from a real person's face, as if alive."[32] The Qing dynasty painter Zou Yigui also described the effect of Western paintings he had seen when he testified that "the Westerners are rather good at using a mathematical method, so their paintings are very precise in terms of shading and

[31] Ibid., p. 2.

[32] Quoted from Mo Xiaoye 莫小也, *Shiqi-shiba shiji chuanjiaoshi yu xi hua dong jian* 十七—十八世紀傳教士與西畫東漸 [*The Seventeenth and Eighteenth-Century Missionaries and the Eastward Spread of Western Painting*] (Hangzhou: China Fine Art College Press, 2002), p. 54.

distance. All figures and buildings they paint have shadows, and the colors and brushes they use are completely different from what we use in China. Their scenes are all measured by a triangular instrument and go from wide to narrow. The buildings and palaces they paint on the wall almost make you feel as though you could walk right in."[33] The verisimilitude of Western painting certainly left a deep impression on many Chinese who first came to see it. But if verisimilitude comes out of an objectivism that eliminates "the self" in constructing its artistic world, are we to conclude that Western landscape painting creates a "world that has no self" because it is more realistic than Chinese painting in the representation of nature?

On the Chinese side, verisimilitude is neither a technical desideratum nor a theoretical emphasis. Instead, from fairly early on, Chinese painting practice and theoretical reflections have put more weight on such notions as "intention" (*yi* 意), "vital energy" (*qi* 氣), and "spirit" (*shen* 神), that is, on the artist's subjective ideas rather than life-like representation of external objects. A treatise on landscape attributed to Wang Wei begins with the statement that "in painting landscapes, intention comes first before the use of brushes."[34] Zhang Yanyuan also remarks that though nature has all kinds of colors, shapes, and moods, painters "use black ink and have all five colors suggested, and that is called intention accomplished." What is important is to articulate human intention and imagination, not the realistic portrayal of things; therefore, he cautions every novice painter, "in painting objects, it is very important to avoid a much too fastidious portrayal of shapes and colors, the external techniques exposed in minute details."[35] Traditional Chinese aesthetic sensibilities thus tend to downgrade verisimilitude in favor of "likeness in spirit" (*shen si* 神似). "What I call painting," says Ni Zan (1301–1374), a famous painter of the Yuan dynasty, "is nothing but a few free-flowing strokes of the brush, not at all aiming at likeness in real shape, but done only for my own pleasure."[36] The great poet Su Shi (1037–1101) has a famous line that best represents the view of traditional literati painters: "Commenting on paintings in terms of verisimilitude, your views would be close to those of children."[37] Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072), another great poet of the Song dynasty, also remarks that "the ancient painters aimed at intention, not shapes."[38] In *Mengxi's Conversations with a Writing Brush*, the erudite scholar Shen Kuo (1031–1095) also articulates an opinion that we have by now grown familiar with when he says: "the subtlety of calligraphy and painting must be appreciated in

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[33] Zou Yigui, *Xiaoshan huapu* [*Xiaoshan's Painting Models*], in *Lidai lun hua mingzhu huibian* [*Collection of Famous Writings on Painting from Various Dynasties*], p. 466.

[34] Wang Wei 王維, *Shanshui lun* 山水論 [*On Landscape Painting*], ibid., p. 32.

[35] Zhang Yanyuan, *Lun hua* [*On Paintings*], ibid., p. 38.

[36] Ni Zan 倪瓚, *Lun hua* 論畫 [*On Painting*], ibid., p. 205.

[37] Su Shi 蘇軾, "Two poems on the Branches by Mr Wang of Yanling," poem no. 1, in *Su Shi shiji* 蘇蘇詩集 [*Su Shi's Collected Poems*], ed. Wang Wenhao 王文浩 (1764-?), 8 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1982), 5:1525.

[38] Ouyang Xiu 歐陽修, "Panche tu," in *Ouyang Xiu quanji* 歐陽修全集 [*Ouyang Xiu's Complete Works*], 2 vols. (Beijing: Zhongguo shudian, 1992), 1:43.

spirit, and it cannot be sought in external shapes." He then speaks of a rarity in his own household collection, a Wang Wei painting of a banana tree in snow, which does not make sense as bananas do not grow in cold winter with heavy snow around. Shen Kuo argues, however, that "this is what conceived in the mind and executed by the hand, good as far as the intention is realized; thus it creates its own reason and penetrates into one's spirit, dictated as though by a heavenly intention. But all these are difficult to convey to the unenlightened vulgar people."[39] That is to say, a painter can create through imagination something fictional and impossible in nature, something that "creates its own reason and penetrates into one's spirit, dictated as though by a heavenly intention." From this we may realize that Chinese landscape painting is not at all pure representation of nature without involvement of the artist's subjective self; rather, it is a representation of the nature conceived in the artist's mind and therefore the externalization or manifestation of the artist's self and his ideas. Guo Xi (1001–1090) of the Song dynasty maintains that "the artist should cultivate himself to have a generous and pleasant inclination and appreciative mind," and in such a condition, whatever is conceived in his mind will all "naturally fall in place in his mind and become visible almost imperceptibly under his brush."[40] If indeed natural sceneries in landscape are all depictions of what the artist has conceived in his mind, then, how can we see Chinese landscape painting as pure nature, a "world that has no self," when all it does is to manifest the artist's self and intention, and when the world created in the painting is nothing but a world the artist has conceived and intended?

In fact, Wang Guowei's "world that has no self" is not meant to eliminate the self at all but just to destabilize the rigid opposition between the self and external things. When he describes such a world as one in which it becomes "impossible to know where the self begins and where the thing ends," he is echoing the famous phrase in the *Zhuangzi* when the philosopher wakes up from a dream and feels uncertain which is the real condition: whether he is still dreaming or he is awake or whether what we call a dream is actually the reality. It becomes impossible to determine, says Zhuangzi, "whether it is Zhuang Zhou dreaming to be a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming to be Zhuang Zhou" the philosopher. That is the condition of a total erasure of the differentiations of things and the self, what Zhuangzi calls: "the transformation of things."[41] In a famous poem describing his friend Wen Yuke painting bamboos, Su Shi writes: "When Yuke is painting bamboos,/he sees only bamboos and no human being./Not only does he see no human beings,/but he has forsaken his own

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[39] Shen Kuo 沈括, with annotations by Hu Daojing 胡道靜, *Xin jiaozhu Mengxi bitan* 新校注夢溪筆談 [*Mengxi's Conversations with a Writing Brush with New Annotations*] (Hong Kong: Zhonghua, 1975), p. 169.

[40] Guo Xi 郭熙, *Lin quan gaozhi* 林泉高致 [*The Elegance of Woods and Springs*], in *Lidai lun hua mingzhu huibian* [*Collection of Famous Writings on Painting from Various Dynasties*], pp. 71–72.

[41] Guo Qingfan 郭慶藩 (1844–1895), *Zhuangzi jishi* 莊子集釋 [*Variorum Edition of the Zhuangzi*], in *Zhuzi jicheng* [*Collection of Master Writings*], 3:53–54.

self./His body and bamboos have become one,/all endlessly fresh and full of grace."[42] In a prose piece, Su Shi recounts what his painter friend has told him, saying that "in painting bamboos, you must have full-grown bamboos in your bosom."[43] What all these point to is the theoretical point that art cannot be anything else but the artist's imaginative creation, a great effort on the part of the artist, what the poet Du Fu describes as "the painstaking effort at the execution of one's intent."[44] On the surface, Chinese paintings do look very different from Western paintings, their forms are indeed different, but they are not so far from one another in the sense that arts, whether Chinese or Western, all strive to give expression to human aesthetic sensibilities toward nature. Chinese landscape seems to give much more space to mountains and rivers rather than human beings, but that is only the superficial difference in size and measurement, and it does not imply that mountains and rivers have more weight than human beings in Chinese landscape paintings or that Chinese landscape does not involve human consciousness.

What the artist tries to portray through the scenes of nature is precisely a human intent or imagination. Shi Tao (1630–1724), a famous painter and Buddhist monk of the early Qing dynasty, puts it very well when he declares that "that which is called painting follows one's heart." Again he remarks that "mountains and rivers make me to speak for them. They come out of me, and I also come out of them. I search magnificent mountains and hills as my sketches. Mountains and rivers meet me in spirit and we are all transformed, for we all return to the Great Spring." What this Buddhist monk expresses in a sort of mysterious language is the idea that the painter is the spokesperson for nature and that the artist is unified with nature in spirit. Wu Guanzhong, a contemporary painter with training in Western painting, believes that Shi Tao's words have articulated "the very nature of art *as* art." He even maintains that "this seventeenth-century Chinese monk had prophesized the eventual birth of Western expressionism."[45] Yun Shouping (1633–1690), an early Qing painter, also remarks that "mountains in spring look like smiling, mountains in summer look like vexed, mountains in autumn look like putting on cosmetics, and mountains in winter look like sleeping. Mountains themselves cannot speak of their moods in the four seasons, but man can speak for them. Autumn can make one feel sad and it can also make one seem pensive. He who wants to paint autumnal scenes must first understand that which makes one sad or pensive before he can execute the painting."[46] Even though Western landscape paintings depict nature realistically, they devote

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[42] Su Shi, "Three poems on Yuke's bamboos in Yao Buzhi's collection," *Su Shi shiji* [*Su Shi's Collected Poems*], 5:1522.

[43] Su Shi, "Wen Yuke's bamboo paintings," *Su Shi wenji* [*Su Shi's Collected Writings*], 6 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1979), 2:365.

[44] Du Fu 杜甫 with annotations by Qiu Zhao'ao 仇兆鰲 (fl. 1685), *Du shi xiangzhu* 杜詩詳注 [*Du Fu's Poems with Detailed Annotations*], 5 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1979), 3:1149.

[45] Wu Guanzhong 吳冠中, *Wo du Shi Tao hua yulu* 我讀石濤畫語錄 [*My Reading of Shi Tao's Remarks on Painting*], (Beijing: Rongbaozhai, 1997), pp. 1, 16, 18.

[46] Yun Shouping 惲壽平, *Nantian lunhua* 南田論畫 [*On Painting*], in *Lidai lun hua mingzhu huibian* [*Collection of Famous Writings on Painting from Various Dynasties*], p. 329.

much space to human activities and give expression to human emotions and sensibilities. Chinese landscape paintings, on the other hand, are mostly natural scenery with mountains, rivers, or clouds predominant and with rather small human figures, but they are nonetheless expression of the artist's conceptualization and intention that claim to speak for nature. Therefore, we may conclude that nature as represented in arts, however different it may appear to be in Chinese and Western traditions, is always nature humanized.

Beginning with Confucius, Chinese literati have always projected human values onto nature and relate it to the qualities of a cultivated human being. In the *Analects* we read: "The wise one enjoys rivers and the benevolent one enjoys mountains."[47] In another place, we find Confucius contemplating on the fast moving river, saying: "things pass away just like that, day and night!"[48] Someone asked Mencius why did Confucius often talk about rivers and what did he mean by his remarks, and Mencius replies that "the source of the river flows out incessantly, day and night," and he further explains that Confucius used that as a metaphor for the endless cultivation of a moral person and for the idea that the source of moral virtues is inexhaustible, just like that of a great river.[49] The famous Confucian scholar Dong Zhongshu (179–104 B. C. E.) of the Han dynasty puts it more clearly when he tries to explain what Confucius meant in that famous expression, arguing that natural scenery may suggest to us associations with moral virtues, "therefore gentlemen use them in metaphorical expressions."[50] Evidently for traditional Chinese scholars, mountains and rivers have the efficacy of enlightening the human mind and intellect, and in the enjoyment of the beauty of nature, certain moral lessons are to be learned. In Chinese landscape and nature poetry, then, we find both the Taoist outlook on pure nature and the Confucian outlook on nature with implications of moral virtues, and sometime it is difficult to distinguish the one from the other. The great Tang poet Li Bai (701–762) describes an imagined conversation the poet has with an interlocutor: "You ask me why do I dwell in these green mountains,/But I smile without a reply, only an easy mind./The river flows away silently, bearing the fallen peach blossoms,/Here is another world, but not the world of men."[51] These imaginary question and answer quietly set up an opposition between nature and "the world of men," with nature obviously superior to the human world. But Li Bai has another poem that seems to imply a different kind of human-nature relationship: "All birds have flown away, high above,/A lonely cloud moves on leisurely./Looking at one another, never feeling

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[47] Liu Baonan 劉寶楠 (1791–1855), *Lunyu zhengyi* 論語正義 [*The Correct Meaning of the Analects*], in *Zhuzi jicheng* [*Collection of Master Writings*], 1:127.

[48] Ibid., 1:188.

[49] Jiao Xun 焦循 (1763–1820), *Mengzi zhengyi* 孟子正義 [*The Correct Meaning of the Works of Mencius*], in *Zhuzi jicheng* [*Collection of Master Writings*], 1:331.

[50] Dong Zhongshu 董仲舒, *Chunqiu fanlu* 春秋繁露 [*Exuberant Dews of the Spring and Autumn*] (Shanghai: Commercial Press, 1937), pp. 249–50.

[51] Li Bai 李白, "Question and Answer in the Mountain," in *Li Taibai quanji* 李太白全集 [*Li Bai's Complete Works*], 3 vols. (Beijing: Zhonghua, 1977), 2:874.

tired,/All there is alone is the Jingting Mountain."[52] In this poem, the poet is looking at the Jingting Mountain with a seemingly objective attitude as an observer of nature, but he and the mountain are "looking at one another, never feeling tired," thus the mountain is also looking at the man, and the poet becomes the one who speaks for nature. In a famous *ci* poem, Xing Qiji (1140–1207) writes: "I look at the blue mountain and see how delightful it is,/I believe that's how the blue mountain would look at me./Feelings and looks, all correspond to one another."[53] Clearly the poet does not wish to distinguish his subjective self and the blue mountain while bestowing feelings on the natural scene. There are many other Chinese poems that combine emotions (*qing* 情) with scenes (*jing* 景) skillfully to integrate the human and the natural, with no clear distinction of the self and the natural environment, thus forming a long and rich tradition of seeking spiritual values and the calm of the mind in the beauty of nature. There is indeed a deep appreciation of nature in the Chinese cultural tradition as exemplified in poetry and painting, but it is nature as conceptualized in the human mind and expressed in creative arts, thus a nature humanized. Man and nature form an intimate relationship between the self and the outside world, a relationship of coexistence and interaction, and it is in the great works of arts and literature that we find powerful and effective ways to articulate and represent that relationship. In that sense, then, the study of landscape painting and nature poetry provides not only an opportunity to revisit the creative works with great aesthetic values but also a profound way to help us understand both nature and ourselves.

[52] Li Bai, "Sitting Alone in Mount Jingting," ibid., 2:1079.

[53] Xing Qiji 辛棄疾, "In the tune of *He xinlang*," in Deng Guangming 鄧廣銘 (ed.), *Jiaxuan ci biannian jianzhu* 稼軒詞編年箋注 [*Xing Qiji's ci Poetry in Chronological Order with Annotations*] (Shanghai: Shanghai guji, 1993), p. 515.